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ABSTRACT

Business and Humanities are fields that have rarely appreciated each other. Humanists have tended to view business as narrow and one-dimensional, and business people have tended to view the humanities as idealistic and removed from the world. In order to combat these views and bring these fields closer together, Monroe Community College has developed a course entitled "Money in Literature," which emphasizes the importance of business in literature and everyday life. In this course, works of literature are considered from two points of view: first, from the standpoint of the traditional concerns of literature, such as character development and writing style; and, second, from the viewpoint of business concerns, such as the economic principles evidenced in the work. The course is team-taught by faculty members from the Business and English Departments and is listed within both departments, thus aiding in course recruitment and allowing students to fulfill requirements in a variety of areas. Through the examination of works, such as Clavell's "King Rat," from the perspectives of both disciplines, business students are taught the importance of liberal arts content to speaking, writing, and decision-making skills; and humanities students are made aware of the structure and vocabulary of the business world. (HB)

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INTEGRATING BUSINESS AND THE HUMANITIES

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Presented at the 62nd Annual AACJC Convention,
St. Louis, Missouri -- April, 1982

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Business and humanities are fields that have rarely appreciated each other. Humanities people see businessmen as narrow practitioners, tied to the bottom line, ignorant of man's spiritual nature. Business people, on the other hand, see humanists as amiable dreamers, starving in garrets, pleasant to talk to, but,--would you want your child to grow up to be one? Actually, of course, none of us can afford to be only a businessman or only a humanist, but often our education prepares us as if the world could be one-dimensional.

The humanities have traditionally given business a bum rap. My field, literature, has portrayed the business world as shallow, grasping, and spiritually damning. The term BABBITT, from Sinclair Lewis' novel by that name, has come into dictionaries to mean a typical narrow-minded, self-satisfied, spiritually bankrupt businessman. Dante places all merchants in one of the lower circles of purgatory. Camels, we find, can get through the eyes of needles more easily than businessmen can get into heaven. One wonders, with business receiving such a bad press as this, why all our students want to study business!

It is rare for a character in literature to find fulfillment and pleasure in the conduct of business. And yet, all of us to one degree or another are engaged in some aspect of business, and large numbers of people find it extremely exciting and fulfilling. One is reminded of Victorian days when one didn't dare acknowledge enjoying sex because popular opinion held that it was "bad" and morally depleting. Now, those who find their pleasure in the conduct of business seem to be in a similar situation. Maybe it's time business people came out of the closet!

In fact, in literature it's not only a rare character who finds fulfillment in the business world, but in a great deal of literature, no one works at all. Sometimes not working is held up as an ideal. Good examples are to be found in the works of Jane Austen and Henry James.

We were never in a single case, I think, for two generations guilty of a stroke of business. (1)

This pride that Henry James takes in not ever "having" to work seems quaint to us, but much of literature exhibits a disdain of work. In this sense, literature denies an important aspect of human experience. The truth is, our work is important to us. The way we acquire money and spend our time defines us; a person and his career cannot be separated. It's part of what it is to be human. It's an integral part of our practice of life and colors our values and all our relationships.

At Monroe Community College, we've designed a course to bring together, at least in an initial step, these two important areas of our lives. We call the course MONEY IN LITERATURE and it's team-taught by two professors, one from the English Department and one from the Business Department.

We chose money as the uniting theme because money is important both in literature and in economics.

Money is important in fiction because it is at the source of the most important fiction of our lives. (2)

Money is a powerful force in literature. Its abundance or scarcity has great effects on people's lives and decisions. Practically everything that happens to us bears a relationship to how money is used. In a real sense, money defines character. Becky Sharp in VANITY FAIR once remarked, "For 4,000 pounds a year I could have been an honest woman."

How one spends money can be an important index to the depth of one's character. In THE SUN ALSO RISES there are "142 direct references to money, including...paying bills, tipping, betting, bribery and borrowing and lending." (3) Hemingway characters seem to use money, however, only to buy entertainment or to kill time.

Whether one has, or can get, money can mean life itself. In KING RAT by James Clavell, a story that takes place in a Japanese prison camp in WWII, money, or its equivalent, meant that certain people survived because they had access to food or medicine at a crucial time. This was important in a camp where 13 out of 14 people died.

In our course MONEY IN LITERATURE we consider each work of literature from two points of view: the traditional concerns of literature, such as character development, motivation, and writing style; and from the concerns of business, such as--Which economic principles are involved?

Works of literature are about people involved in the economic necessities of their lives. Literary works are not statements of theory, as in economic textbooks, but portray people doing things, or being prevented from doing things, because of money.

Both departments recognized the need for such a cooperative effort. The Business Department, backed by the people who hire their graduates, were well aware of the advantage of a broader liberal arts background. Business, they pointed out, cannot be practiced on a very high level without relying heavily on areas of the humanities. Executives do not only use their technical knowledge, they are constantly involved with "people skills," presumably, liberal arts skills: speaking, writing, listening, digesting, conceptualizing, making decisions, and, most importantly, understanding the consequences of their decisions.

English Department faculty, on the other hand, were aware that their students needed to understand the structure and vocabulary of the world of business. They not only had to get a job, or learn how to price and market their work of art, but above all they needed to understand our economy in order to function well as members of society. The faculty was aware that this is an area widely neglected in humanities education. Graduates are often woefully naive about their country's complex, technologically-based economy. They are vague about what is meant by a "free enterprise system," or the relationship of the private sector to government. They misunderstand the profit motive in business and wildly exaggerate the profits of private industry. A recent poll revealed that college grads estimated private sector profits to be 25-40% of sales revenues--an error of 500-1,000%. (4)

Our course carries two designations: English 106 and Business 106. This means that the course appears twice in the College Catalog; one listing in the Business Department offerings and one in the Liberal Arts offerings. Also, the course is listed under two departments on the computer printout of all sections of all courses offered, that is used by students when they select courses during Registration.

Such cross-listing is a valuable recruitment tool for a course that bears a non-traditional name. Students have a good idea about the content of a course entitled "Short Story" or "Business Law," or they are willing to take a fling at one called "Sex in Literature." However, something called MONEY IN LITERATURE is neither so evident nor so compelling.

The cross-listing is valuable in still another way. Academic counselors are most comfortable when recommending a course offered by their own department. They are familiar with the course content; they know the instructor, and are more likely to be convinced of the value of the course for the student. Through cross-listing we have the counselors of two departments recommending the course--a little bit of market positioning!

A final advantage of offering the course through two departments is the course can fulfill requirements in several areas: literature, humanities, or business, giving students the greatest flexibility when it comes time to audit their credits for graduation.

The course is designed to be team-taught; therefore, two faculty, one from Business and one from English, will be present at each class meeting. This year Janet Glocker, from the Economics Department, and I, from the English Department, are teaching the course. The joint staffing allows both points of view to be developed at the same time.

Such a class might go something like this. As an example, let's use the first book we read, James Clavell's KING RAT, a story set in a WWII prison camp run by the Japanese. The literature professor might call attention to the trade deals arranged by the King to show how Clavell reveals additional details of the King's character in each successive trading situation. This could lead to a discussion of ways that writers portray a character through details.

The Business professor might cite the same trade deals for a different purpose, to indicate some of the features that are necessary for a good trade. The King is successful in his deals because he follows a basic trade principle: he arranges it so that each party to the deal is satisfied that he made a "good" deal, that maybe he even outsmarted the others. This could lead to a discussion of the nature of trade; how

money, or its equivalent, operates as a medium of exchange, even what causes inflation. Literature gives life to business principles because the characters and story have an immediacy that make the theory come alive in ways that a traditional textbook cannot.

The purpose of the course is to draw Business education and the humanities together, to show the human meanings of economic behavior and the economic meanings of human behavior. Maybe we can come to appreciate better what James Fenimore Cooper says of Hawkeye and Rivenoak in THE DEERSLAYER, "for they have traded together, and trade opens the soul." (5)

FOOTNOTES

(1) quoted in The Death and Letters of Alice James, ed., Ruth Bernard Yeazell, University of California Press, 1981.

(2) David S. Gross, "Tales of Obscene Power: Money, Culture, and the Historical Fictions of E.L. Doctorow," Money Talks: Language and Lucre in American Fiction, Roy R. Male, ed., University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1980, p. 77.

(3) Patrick D. Morrow, "The Bought Generation: Another Look at Money in the Sun Also Rises", Money Talks: Language and Lucre in American Fiction, Roy R. Male, ed., University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1980.

(4) Simon Ramo, "Universities in a Technological Society," Wharton, Winter 80-82, p. 59.

(5) 1841, Chapter XVII. Noted by Professor Thomas Ashton, Professor of Literature, University of Massachusetts at the Summer Institute in Utica, New York, sponsored jointly by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Community College Humanities Association, June-July, 1981.

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